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Dismal grades for Southland

Traffic garners 'F' on annual report card

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Southern California's traffic-choked freeways finally got the failing grade they deserved, while other indicators reflected a declining quality of life, an annual report card released Thursday showed.

The "State of the Region" report by the Southern California Association of Governments also gave D's in education and housing. The region received B's - a "moderately good" rating - for employment and safety and C's for income and air quality.

The report was released on the same day that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed a multibillion-dollar bond issue to help pay for freeway and infrastructure improvements needed to cope with the state's anticipated growth.

"This report card is not the report card that I or any one of us would want to take home," said Mark Pisano, executive director of SCAG.

"The governor's message and actions of the Legislature to initiate new funding streams is paramount. Bonds and other financing ... (are) going to be absolutely critical."

In giving traffic a failing grade - it's received D's since 2000 - SCAG officials cited the 93 hours that commuters waste in congestion each year, the lack of new roadways and the lagging use of mass transit.

"It's the pits," said SCAG President Toni Young, who sits on the Port Hueneme City Council and endures a three-hour commute on the Ventura (101) Freeway to meetings in downtown Los Angeles.

"You just don't want to go out on the road if you don't have to. It's getting ridiculous."

The SCAG report is based on 2004 data from Los Angeles, Ventura, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and Imperial counties.

Despite an economic recovery and a modest 2 percent gain in household income, the quality of life continues to deteriorate because of gridlocked highways and skyrocketing housing prices, officials said.

In housing, despite the biggest building boom in 15 years - local governments permitted 93,200 residential units, twice as many as in 1998 - home ownership remains out of reach for many.

With the red-hot housing market, fewer than 20 percent of residents in Los Angeles, Orange and Ventura counties could afford to buy the median-priced home of \$400,000. Prices have gone up since to nearly \$500,000 in Los Angeles County.

Much of the new home building was in apartments and condos, which increased 33 percent over the previous year.

The only bright spots were the continued decline in violent crimes and the region's first meaningful job growth since 2000.

But Bruce Ackerman, president of the Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley, said the report needs to be taken in context of the Southern California's diverse neighborhoods.

While the San Fernando Valley suffers from the same housing and traffic issues as the rest of the region, there have been vast improvements from a year or even a decade ago.

"Everybody else I talk to ... has a better feeling today than they did in the past," he said. That said, Ackerman supports calls for a massive state bond to help build housing, transportation and other needed infrastructure.

"What was the last freeway project you've seen completed? If we want to continue to enjoy the quality of life we have, we have to take some serious looks at biting the bullet on these bond measures to improve our infrastructure. I don't want to pay more taxes any more than you do. But I'd rather do this than continue to risk the quality of life deterioration."